DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 171 903 PS 010 615

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TITLE The Cultural Context of Child Development.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (San Francisco, California, March 15-18, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; *Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Environment; Cultural Factors; Developmental Psychology; Infants; *Models; *Research Methodology; Research Problems; Theories

ABSTRACT

This essay supports William Kessen's recent call for a reorientation of child development research toward studies of the child in context and focuses on problems in monocultural studies of the child to argue that this reorientation will require significant changes in child development research methodology. Research on cultural differences in moral reasoning patterns and infant sleeping behavior is used to argue that a disregard for the role of cultural context in describing the child can lead to a lack of differentiation between the structure of the child's own development and the structure of the environment. Cultural differences in infant motor development are employed to show that when research focuses on only one culture, individual differences in infants are more obvious than differences in contexts and the effects of culture are rendered invisible. The fact that researchers are often members of the culture studied is said to have a similar effect and to encourage the development of genetic or universalistic theories, even of group differences (e.g., IQ) within cultures. It is suggested that what is needed is not merely more cross-cultural studies but also new theories of development produced by the collaboration of anthropologists and psychologists. (Author/BH)

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THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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PS010615

Paper presented at the meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development: Symposium on Anthropological contributions to theories of child development. San Francisco, March, 1979. To be published in: C.M. Super and S. Harkness (Eds.), Anthropological contributions to theories of child development. New trends for child development, 1980 in preparation.

The Cultural Context of Child Development

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At the meetings of the American Psychological Association last fall, William Kessen described what he saw as psychology's inability to find an enduring characterization of the child.[1] At different periods in Western history, he noted, psychologists and philosophers had viewed the child as either in need of control or of freedom; as inherently good or basically sinful; as active participants in or passive recipients of their education. The distressing aspect of these changes, he said, was that they seemed to come and go as easily as the frivolities of fashion.

Kessen predicted two possible ways out of this dilemma, which he described as, respectively, a dream and a nightmare. In the dream, psychological theory, by continuing along its present path, would someday discover the right conceptualization of the child, and the contradictory elements would fall into place. The nightmare was that the child would turn out not to be the appropriate unit of analysis at all. Instead, the "child in context" would be the proper subject of psychological research. In Kessen's view, however, what seemed initially to be the nightmare was coming to look more promising than the dream, and he concluded by suggesting that future research focus on the child in context.

Kessen's words were no doubt welcome to all anthropologists who heard them, for anthropological theory has long maintained

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1 Kessen 1978

that human behavior cannot adequately be understood without reference to the cultural and social context in which it occurs. In fact, an anthropologist might have asked why the idea of the child in context was not the dream in the first place instead of the nightmare. Yet, on further consideration, there might be good reason for this idea to seem like a nightmare to psychologists. As Kessen saw, the study of the child in context would require a fundamental change in psychological theory, a paradigmatic shift in the Kuhnian sense. To contemplate such a reorientation might seem frightening. What Kessen did not elaborate on, however, was the implications this shift would also have for the modes of procedure which have been the mainstay of psychological research. To change not only the subject of study but also the ways of studying it might well seem like a nightmarish prospect.

The concept of the child in context, as described by Kessen, is one which holds great promise for the future development of research on children. Yet, I believe that the implementation of this concept is currently hampered by powerful traditions in psychological theory. These traditions create a tendency to nativist theories of development which are inadequate for the description of both individual development and group differences. Today, I would like to talk about one of these traditions: psychology's primary focus on monocultural studies. I will discuss some of the problems for psychological theory which result from an over-reliance on monocultural studies, and suggest some possible solutions to these problems.

A salient feature of monocultural studies as carried out by psychologists is that the researcher and subjects are usually members of the same culture: in our case, the white American middle class. Under these conditions, researcher and subjects usually share a large number of cultural values and beliefs, many in the form of ideas about the ways people are or the ways people should be. The culture is, as it were, invisible. Perhaps this would not matter if psychologists wanted to talk only about the development of the white American middle class child. Indeed, to limit psychological theory in this way might be one way to interpret Kessen's call for the child in context as the new unit of analysis. However, psychological theory has had higher ambitions than this; and there the monocultural emphasis becomes problematical.

First, to ignore the role of the cultural context in describing the child can lead to a lack of differentiation between the structure of the child's own development and the structure of the environment. A case in point is theory related to sleep/wake behavior in infancy.[2] The longest single episode of sleep during a 24-hour period averages around four hours for American babies at one month of age. Over the next three months, there is a sharp increase in maximum sleep episodes, so that at four months the American baby averages a maximum sleep of almost eight hours. On the basis of American studies, it has been argued that the increase in maximum sleep over the first few months of life is one of the best behavioral indices of the psychological maturation of the brain.

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2 Super and Harkness 1978

The development of sleep/wake behavior in rural African infants, however, shows a rather different pattern. The African baby's average maximum sleep at one month is about three hours, and this measure remains stable for at least the first eight months of life.

The differences in sleep patterns between American and African babies can be readily explained by the different contexts for this behavior which each culture provides. American parents generally make major modifications in their living quarters and family life to create a separate space for the baby. At night, the baby sleeps in its own bed--often, in a separate room. Night waking is apt to be inconvenient to parents, especially since it usually involves the complex and highly structured behavior called feeding. Consequently, parents are highly motivated to get the baby to sleep through the night; and this disposition is reinforced by child care experts. The African babies, on the other hand, are constantly in the company of other people, whose activities determine their opportunities to sleep. At night, the baby sleeps in skin-to-skin contact with the mother, and may wake up to nurse at will. The African data suggest a modification in theory related to the development of sleep/wake behavior: the increase of maximum sleep episodes in infancy may be an index of the maturation of the brain only when the environment is pushing it to the limits of its capacities.

Another example of lack of differentiation between the structure of child development and the structure of the cultural context is Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of the development of moral reasoning. Derived originally from interviews of American children, the theory posits six universal stages of moral development, each intellectually and ethically superior to the ones beneath it. Research carried out in Kenya,[3] however, showed that men in a traditional rural community use only stages two and three reasoning; the upper three stages are not present. Stages four through six on the Kohlberg scale emphasize the separation of principles of authority from the persons who exercise it, individual rights, and abstract principles of justice. These stages appear to be derived from the Western legal-judicial system, with its separation of powers, representative democracy, and formal election of officials. Political and judicial authority in traditional Kenyan societies, on the other hand, is vested in community elders who are directly answerable to their neighbors. There is no need to distinguish between the authority of principles and the authority of persons, since an elder who ceases to represent the values of the community will immediately lose his status as an elder. In dispute settlement cases which are arbitrated by community elders, the goal is not to vindicate the rights of the individual but rather to reestablish social equilibrium among people who will continue to associate daily and to rely on each other for their well-being. Stage three on the Kohlberg scale, which emphasizes interpersonal

3 Harkness, Edwards, and Super 1977

concordance, is a valid representation of the values of this kind of community, and in fact stage three reasoning was favored by the elders of the community we studied. Thus, although stages of moral reasoning may follow upon one another in a given sequence, as Kohlberg suggested, the cultural universality may consist of only the first three stages. It seems likely that social reality and experience, not simply cognitive development, are prime determinants of their further development.

A second problem in monocultural studies springs from the fact that the amount of variation which can be observed in individuals tends to be much greater than the amount of variation in the context. This, in addition to the close cultural affinity which often exists between researcher and subjects, tends to render the culture invisible. The effects of the context are not readily measurable for a monocultural study because they are about the same for all members of the sample. With culture held constant, individual variation will emerge as a major element in the outcome measures; in multicultural studies, on the other hand, the effects of different contexts may be perceived over and above the variations in individuals. An example of this is infant motor development. Psychologists have generally treated infant motor development as more akin to traits such as hair color than to other behaviors: given an environment supportive enough for the system to operate, the skills unfold as directed by the genes. Within our culture, whatever variation can be observed in the achievement of motor milestones such as sitting and walking does not seem to be meaningfully related to the environment.

Studies of infant motor development in East Africa,[4] on the other hand, have shown that, given a wide enough base of cultural variation, environmental effects on motor development can be demonstrated. Specifically, traditional East African practices of training infants in sitting and walking, and other aspects of infant care such as the way babies are carried, are significantly related to how old babies are when they learn to sit and walk. In the cultural groups where these training practices are most frequently carried out, babies learn to sit and walk, on the average, a few weeks before American babies do. The effects of training practices on the development of walking have also been shown in an experimental study with an American sample.[5] Both the cross-cultural comparison and the experimental manipulation of contextual variables within a single cultural group combine to show that, while infant motor development is certainly dependent on maturational processes, the attainment of motor milestones is also related to aspects of the context in which the child develops.

The invisibility of the culture in psychological theory, which originates with its base in monocultural studies, is a major contributor to the current predominance of nativist theories of child development. Because many aspects of cultural systems are taken for granted by researchers, and because the contextual variation is severely limited in studies within one cultural setting, observed variations in behavior are attributed either to genetic structure, or to supposed cognitive universals. As we have seen in the foregoing examples, the development of behaviors can be

4 Super 1976; Kilbride 1976
5 Zelazo, Zelazo and Kolb 1972

theoretically attributed to physiological maturation whether our culture pushes this behavior, as in the case of maximum sleep, or whether our own cultural practices are more or less neutral in relation to the behavior, as in the case of sitting and walking. Kohlberg's theory posits a developmental sequence in the emergence of moral reasoning abilities, which is based on hypothesized universals in cognitive development and also supposed constancies in social environments around the world. In all these cases, we see a lack of differentiation between the child and the context of the child's development, with consequent ascription of all the variation to innate determinants.

This is not to argue that nativist theories of human development are basically wrong; the above examples, in fact, reaffirm the role of innately determined aspects of development as they are reflected differently in different contexts. To look at child development only from the nativist angle, however, is to see only half the picture.

The examples I've discussed are addressed to the inadequacies of nativist theories for describing child development as we see it in one cultural setting such as our own. A further problem of the nativist point of view, however, is that it is not able to recognize real environmental contributions to child development even in situations where they should be obvious. I refer here to psychological studies of group differences, whether among various social classes or among different cultural groups. Here we find the same paradigm used in monocultural studies of individuals, applied to multi-cultural

studies of groups. As with individual differences, variation at the group level is attributed either to hypothesized differences in genetic structure, or to different levels of competence. To return to our earlier examples, the "precocious" development of sitting and walking in African babies has frequently been attributed to genetic differences between Africans and Caucasians,[6] while the stage three reasoning used by adults in traditional non-Western communities has been called intellectually inferior to the higher stage reasoning used by educated Westerners.[7]

Obviously, the inadequacy of the nativist bias has serious social and ethical problems for group comparisons in a way which is not true for monocultural studies of individual variation. Considerable attention has been given recently to righting the misrepresentations resulting from so-called culturally biased studies. However, I believe that the basic problem cannot be corrected until it is recognized that the cultural bias results not so much from the imposition of the researcher's own cultural values as from reliance on theoretical models which do not account for culture at all.

If, as I have argued, the nativist bias of psychological theory is in part the result of psychology's reliance on monocultural studies, it follows that a multi-cultural approach to sampling will be necessary to obtain a more balanced view of child development. Let me emphasize, however, that this does not simply mean the proliferation of cross-cultural studies based on monoculturally derived theories of child development. In order for the broader sampling to

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6 Geber and Dean 1957; Jensen 1969
7 Kohlberg 1971

be productive, it will have to be used in conjunction with theories which can account for cultural as well as individual variations in behavior. In practical terms, this implies a closer working relationship between psychology and anthropology than has been common to date. If such a partnership is achieved, I believe it will further the study of the child as carried out by members of both disciplines, leading to psychological studies which more adequately recognize the role of culture in child development as well as to anthropological studies of children which incorporate the developmental perspective. As Kessen suggested, the child in context may be the appropriate unit of analysis for future psychological studies; but this will be meaningful only if the relationships between the two components in this unit are systematically studied. Such a study may bring us closer to the original goal of developmental psychology, an understanding of the child.

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